



## Convergence of Multiple Forms in Jim Corbett's Trilogy

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**ABSTRACT:** A close look at the form of Jim Corbett's trilogy comprising *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* and *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon* reveals a unique convergence of the elements of jungle books, comprising a keen naturalist's study of plants and wild animals as well as lessons in survival tactics; epic; travel literature; and drama which lights up the central theme of hunting. This subtle but unobtrusive complexity of form makes the reading of Corbett's trilogy on man-eater hunting a rich and rounded experience—something much beyond the realm of everyday bestsellers.

**KEYWORDS:** Jungle books, naturalist, epic, travel literature

Speaking about the aesthetic challenges that a modern writer has to confront and overcome, Wayne C. Booth observes in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* that “the modern writer is faced with new material, and what he has to do is to discover the new form that this material requires” (224). Evidently, Jim Corbett has been able to “discover the new form” in his trilogy comprising *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* and *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon* by fusing the elements of various forms of literature in order to achieve a unique and rich blend. This subtle convergence of forms is an integral part of Corbett's endeavour to present truth like any true novelist, as observed by Marjorie Boulton in *The Anatomy of the Novel*, “the novelist, like the conscientious historian, psychologist, sociologist or even scientist, tries to present ... truth by applying imagination, insight and organization to observation” (16).

Corbett knew the jungles of the Kumaon region better than any of his contemporaries, including native Indians. Therefore, it is no exaggeration when he writes in *Man-Eaters of*

*Kumaon*, “I had walked through these jungles by day and often by night—for near on half a century, and could have found my way blindfold to any part of them” (34). Further, he describes *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* as “a book of jungle stories” (15)—a description which applies equally aptly to each one of the other two books of the trilogy as well, namely, *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* and *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon*. The ‘stories’, however, are not fictional as is the case with Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, but a faithful and authentic account of Corbett's real adventures featuring real-life man-eaters, real human characters and exact dates, time and places. Most fascinatingly, the mighty antagonists of the trilogy—the man-eaters—featured prominently in Government records of British India. For instance, Corbett writes in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, “This was the first human being killed by the tiger which later received recognition in the Government records as ‘The Mohan Man-eater’ ” (114). These Government records, one of which appears on page 43 of *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, contained graphic details including the number of human victims claimed by each man-eater along with the place and year of the killings.

The jungle stories in the trilogy are replete with a rich content of rivetting observations about the flora and fauna of the region through which Corbett effortlessly initiates the urban reader into the beautiful and action-packed world of the jungles. In one such passage in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* Corbett provides the reader a glimpse of the rich wildlife of his time:

The river I have recently been fishing in flows, for some forty miles of its length, through a beautifully wooded valley, well stocked with game and teeming with bird life. I had the curiosity to count the various kinds of animals and birds seen in one day, and by the evening of that day my count showed, among animals *sambhar*,



*chital*, *kakar*, *ghooral*, pig, *langur* and red monkeys; and among birds seventy-five varieties including peafowl, red jungle fowl, *kalege* pheasants, blackpartridge, and bush quail. In addition to these I saw a school of five otters in the river, several small *mugger* and a python.... (143-44)

Throughout the trilogy, he refers to crows, vultures, magpies, babblers, *chukor* (partridge), *kalege* pheasant, peacock, drongo, and a large number of other birds.

Corbett writes about the flora of the region with equal fervour. For instance, in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, there is a lucid description of the clerodendron plant, “there was a patch of clerodendron, about forty yards wide. This plant grows in dense patches to a height of five feet, and has widely spread leaves and a big head of flowers not unlike horse-chestnut. It is greatly fancied by tiger, *sambhar* and pig because of the shade it gives” (100-101). The insightful observation that a tiger may be spotted resting in the shade of a clerodendron plant, suddenly ignites a wildlife lover’s interest in this dwarfish plant. On another occasion, Corbett refers to some other wild plants in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, “In these open spaces grow amaltas with their two-foot-long sprays of golden bloom, *karaunda* and box bushes with their white star-shaped flowers. The combined scent from these flowers fills the air ... with the most delicate and pleasing of perfumes” (144).

Further, Corbett makes effective use of certain distinctive elements of the epic in a modified form to suit the aesthetic purposes in his trilogy. To begin with, the momentous action of the trilogy takes place at a grand scale. In this context Corbett himself performs a dual role—that of the narrator (in accordance with the age-old oral tradition of story-telling) as well as the modest, self-effacing, earthly hero. The safety and well-being of thousands of hill-folk depended on the outcome of each one of his heroic exploits. In each case he was pitted against a mighty and dreadful adversary and the road to victory entailed a super-human effort through extreme hardships. Most strikingly, he accomplished his legendary missions almost single-handedly, relying on his own resources of courage, a vast and intimate knowledge of the jungles, his ingenious methods of tracking his quarry and outmanoeuvring it through endlessly crafty moves, his single-minded devotion to the task at hand, his love for the hapless hill-folk, and finally his supreme confidence in himself as a sportsman. Such was the magnitude of the

terror of the man-eaters that they were widely believed to be the incarnation of the devil himself. Consequently, a war-like situation emerges when Corbett confronts and overcomes each one of the scary and ‘evil’ man-eaters after a prolonged strategic struggle. As a result, the persona of Corbett in the trilogy acquires larger than life dimensions, boosted by the unflinching faith people had in him as their champion.

Corbett's position as the people's hero in the trilogy is reflected when he remarks in *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, “The shooting of a man-eater gives one a feeling of satisfaction. Satisfaction at having done a job that badly needed doing. Satisfaction at having outmanoeuvred, on his own ground a very worthy antagonist” (63). After shooting the Panar man-eater, Corbett writes with immense satisfaction in *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, “That night, for the first time in years, the people of Sanouli slept, and have since continued to sleep, free from fear” (86).

In the vicinity of Chuka about fifteen thousand labourers were working in “an area of roughly fifty square miles” (200) on a huge project of felling the trees. The fear of the Chuka man-eater threatened to stall this project as Corbett writes in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, “That a single animal should terrorize a labour force of these dimensions in addition to the residents of the surrounding villages and the hundreds of men who were bringing foodstuffs for the labourers ... is incredible.” (200)

The Panar leopard alone had claimed four hundred human lives (71). After a gruelling contest in the darkness, Corbett managed to corner the man-eater. But the final assault took an unexpected turn and he was called upon to summon every iota of his courage to overcome the mighty adversary. Thus he writes in *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, “I made the men [villagers] promise that they would walk in line behind me, hold their torches high, and not run away and leave me in the dark if the leopard charged (85).” Here is a true image of the epic hero that Corbett was—he walking in front and the men following behind. Suddenly the leopard sprang into view out of darkness. Pandemonium broke out as the men panicked:

... my companions, all of whom were unarmed, turned as one man and bolted. Fortunately for me, in their anxiety to get away they collided with each other and some of the burning splinters of pine—held loosely in their hands—fell to



the ground and continued to flicker, giving me sufficient light to put a charge of slugs into the leopard's chest. (85)

The man-eating leopard of Rudraprayag had indeed earned a well-deserved international notoriety as no other beast can ever match the cunning of his magnitude. Eventually, after a painfully protracted struggle, when the leopard was shot dead, Corbett proclaims with self-effacing modesty that he was merely "a man whose only claim to remembrance was that he had fired one accurate shot" (164). Quite clearly Corbett's use of the various elements of the epic form performs the function of elevating the action of his trilogy to a grand scale.

Yet another illuminating aspect of Corbett's trilogy is the element of travel literature that has been woven intricately into its design along with the elements of jungle books, epic and drama. Corbett travelled extensively across the length and breadth of the Kumaon-Garhwal region during thirty two years of his man-eater hunting career. Almost invariably, he travelled on foot and there can be no doubt whatsoever that this mode of travelling is by far the best for getting to know the people, their culture as well as the surroundings in which they live. Not only was Corbett endowed with a sharp and inquisitive mind, he also had a deep and intimate bonding with the poor people of the hills who, on their part, adored the sahib who was known amongst them as 'Carpet Sahib'.

Corbett relishes providing important historical, geographical and topographical information regarding the places he travels across. In *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* he describes Shreenagar, the ancient capital of Garhwal as "an historic, religious, and trading centre of considerable importance and of great beauty" (2). Delving deeper into the history of Shreenagar Corbett provides the reader with a rare glimpse of its tumultuous past:

It was here, in the year 1805, that the forebears of the Garhwali soldiers who have fought so gallantly in two world wars made their last, and unsuccessful, stand against the Gurkha invaders, and it is a matter of great regret to the people of Garhwal that their ancient city of Shreenagar, together with the palaces of their kings, was swept away, to the last stone, by the bursting of the Gohna Lake dam in 1894. This dam, caused by a landslide in the valley of the Birehi Ganga, a tributary of the Ganges, was 11,000 feet wide at the base, 2,000 feet wide at the summit, and 900 feet high and, when it burst, ten billion cubic feet of

water were released in the short space of six hours ... the flood devastated the valley of the Ganges right down to Hardwar. (2)

In *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* Corbett describes the picturesque terraced fields which "vary in width from a yard to, in some cases, fifty or more yards" (26). Speaking of the village buildings he observes that these are "invariably set at the upper end of the cultivated land" (26). He explains that "this is done with the object of overlooking and protecting the cultivation from stray cattle and wild animals, for except in very rare cases there are no hedges or fences round the fields" (26).

While travelling across Kumaon, Corbett made it a point to observe and record some common objects which would have escaped the eye of a casual traveller. For instance, he describes the traditional torches in *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, "These torches, made of twelve to eighteen inches long splinters of resin-impregnated pine-wood cut from a living tree, give a brilliant light and provide the remote villages in Kumaon with the only illumination they have ever known" (84).

The most conspicuous cultural trait in the conduct of the people of the hills is their hospitality. Corbett highlights it in *The Temple Tiger And More Man-Eaters of Kumaon* as he writes, "I often wonder whether in any other part of the world a stranger whose business was not known arriving unexpectedly at a remote village, would be assured of the same welcome and hospitality as he would receive at any village throughout the length and breadth of Kumaon" (134).

Corbett was a keen observer not only of nature and the kingdom of animals but of human beings as well. The following passage from *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* in which he speaks about the devious Indian way of striking a conversation with strangers, is comparable to some of the finest passages in Jane Austen's novels for intricate prose as well as minute observation:

When strangers meet in India and wish to glean information on any particular subject from each other, it is customary to refrain from broaching the subject that has brought them together—whether accidentally or of set purpose—until the very last moment, and to fill up the interval by finding out everything concerning each other's domestic and private affairs; as for instance, whether married, and if so, the number and sex of children and their ages; if not married, why not; occupation and amount of pay, and so on.



Questions that would in any other part of the world earn one a thick ear, are in India—and especially in our hills—asked so artlessly and universally that no one who has lived among the people dreams of taking offence at them. (119-20)

Corbett could write this passage chiefly because he is the “one who has lived among the people” in addition to being an avid traveller on foot.

Sometimes Corbett finds it more appropriate to write about the people in a lighter vein. For instance in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* he remarks, “*Shikar* yarns, as everyone knows, never lose anything in repetition” (8). He shows awareness of the villagers’ propensity to spice up their *shikar* narratives as he observes that on one occasion giving “full rein to their imagination” (9) they told the gathering “that the [two] *ghooral* [wild goats] had been shot at a range of over a mile [a gross exaggeration], and that the magic bullets used had not only killed the animals like that—but had also drawn them to the *Sahib*’s feet” (9). Corbett explains that it was merely a coincidence that the two *ghooral* had rolled down from their elevated position to where he had been standing and there was nothing ‘magical’ about it!

Speaking of the fervent religious practices of the Hindus, Corbett observes in *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* that all good Hindus have a desire “to perform the pilgrimage to the age-old shrines of Kedarnath and Badrinath” (1). This pilgrimage commences at Hardwar with the pilgrim purifying himself “by immersion in the sacred Har-ki-pauri pool” and doing “*darshan* at the many shrines and temples in Hardwar” (1). As the pilgrim moves northward, Corbett explains, “With Rishikesh behind you, you will come next to Lachman Jhula, where the pilgrim road crosses from the right to the left bank of the Ganges on a suspension bridge”(2). Then again he reverts to the role of a well-informed guide as he observes, “‘Prayag’ is the Hindi word for ‘confluence’. At Rudraprayag, two rivers—the Mandakini coming down from Kedarnath, and the Alaknanda from Badrinath—meet, and from here onwards the combined waters of the two rivers are known to all Hindus as Ganga Mai, and to the rest of the world as the Ganges” (4).

Corbett’s love of travelling and his keen interest in the people and their culture make him an insightful and highly readable writer of travel literature. It can be concluded that the subtle convergence of the elements of jungle books, epic,

drama and travel literature in the trilogy infinitely enriches the central theme of man-eater hunting. This formal complexity is largely responsible for making the reading of Corbett’s trilogy a rich and rounded experience for readers of all generations across the world as opposed to the rather limited and temporal appeal of the loads of hunting stories that were a common place in British India.

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